

Chairman LoBiondo's Statement

Today, the Subcommittee is meeting to review a discussion draft of the Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2006. This hearing will give all members of the Subcommittee the opportunity to consider the authorized funding levels and the legislative language that is included in this draft bill.

The draft bill would authorize nearly \$8.3 billion in funding for the Coast Guard in fiscal year 2007. This authorization includes funding to support each of the Coast Guard's important missions.

For purposes of discussion, the draft bill would authorize \$1.1 billion for the Coast Guard's Integrated Deepwater Systems program. Deepwater will result in a complete recapitalization of Coast Guard vessels, aircraft, and associated communication and control systems. Because the Coast Guard has been tasked with increased responsibilities following September 11th, the Service's legacy fleet of vessels and aircraft are deteriorating at an alarming rate. As I have in previous years, I intend to support an increase in the authorized funding level for the Deepwater as this bill moves forward. Additional funding is necessary to accelerate the production of new Deepwater assets and to sustain the Service's existing legacy assets.

I cannot overestimate my concern with the pace of the Deepwater program. Each day, the men and women of the Coast Guard are faced with the possibility of a major asset failure that puts the safety of personnel and the success of their missions in jeopardy. I am particularly concerned about the service's 110-foot patrol boat class which continues to suffer from hull breaches and unexpected maintenance needs.

First, the Coast Guard planned to convert the remaining 110-foot patrol boats by lengthening the hulls and improving the electronic and communications systems that have become outdated. Following construction, however, the Coast Guard realized that the 123-foot converted boats were plagued with design problems and, as a result, the conversion program has been terminated.

To address the increasing gap in patrol boat readiness, the Coast Guard then proposed to accelerate construction of the Fast Response Cutter (FRC). Just a few months ago, however, the Coast Guard postponed construction and acquisition of the FRC due to concerns about the vessel's proposed design. I am deeply concerned by these problems and as a result, I would urge the Coast Guard to move quickly to identify an available design to replace the 110-foot patrol boat class.

We must complete this program with all deliberate speed. I urge my colleagues to support funding levels that will not only allow the Coast Guard to acquire the assets they need, but would allow the program to be accelerated and brought online over the next 15 years rather than the 25 years that is in the revised plan.

In addition to the authorization of fiscal year 2007 funding, the draft bill proposes to make several amendments to current law. For example, the bill contains a proposal

that would amend the Maritime Drug Law Enforcement Act to establish a civil penalty for individuals who possess personal use quantities of narcotics on a vessel or at a maritime facility. Drug use on vessels can have deadly consequences, and this provision will give the Coast Guard another tool to help keep our waterways safe.

This hearing on the draft bill is the first step in the process to develop a bill that takes a balanced approach to providing the resources and authorities necessary to support each of the Coast Guard's many and varied missions.

I commend the men and women of the Coast Guard for their hard work and self-sacrifice. I thank the witnesses for coming this afternoon, and I look forward to their testimony.